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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANTANANARIVO 000166

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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR: RAVALOMANANA HANGING ON BY A THREAD

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt for reasons 1.4 d and e

¶1. (C) Summary. The political situation in Madagascar is more fluid than ever after the Wednesday take-over of the military command structure by "the Colonels", but the crumbling security situation appears to have settled down in Tana -- at least for now -- as a result of their move. I have met in the past 24 hours separately with the President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, TGV and his team, the President of the National Assembly, UN mediator Drame, various other ministers, and today with the Colonels themselves. The Colonels swore they took over the military command only to restore order and the cohesion of the military, and to help the country find a political solution to its crisis; they blamed the President for giving "political orders" but said they still owe their allegiance to the President and the Constitution. At the same time, there is currently huge momentum against the President, who is increasingly desperate and who many think will have to resign if he wants to stay alive, in Madagascar, and/or in possession of his business and personal empire. The GOM may be about to fracture with ministers weary of ongoing death-threats again saying privately that they will resign; this time it looks credible. The NCC (now called "assises nationales" here) were postponed from their scheduled launch today but the Colonels say they want this dialogue to take place and that they will issue a declaration to that effect later today after meeting with their brethren from the police and gendarmerie. The elements may soon be present for the NCC to start within the next few days, but there is also great urgency to do it before other dynamics (including the possibility of other military elements) kick in. End Summary.

¶2. (C) "The Colonels": I met today with the new Armed Forces Chief of Staff Col. Andre, his deputy Col Noel, and two other colonels, in company of five other chiefs of mission. We requested the meeting to make three points, on the importance of respecting the constitution, of restoring order (including protecting foreigners), and of assuring that the NCC gets launched as soon as possible to begin the process of finding a consensus political solution. Col. Andre was reassuring on all points. He explained that they had ousted the general officers who were too ready to take "political orders" from the President and thus had caused them to kill civilians, and created untenable tensions within the corps itself. Their priorities were to restore public order and cohesion within the ranks. Andre said that "the military has no role in politics." I asked him about the concept of civilian control of the military in the current odd situation, with no Defense Minister in place following the (forced) resignation on Tuesday of the previous incumbent. Col. Noel responded that the President, whose portrait remains hanging above Andre's desk, is still in charge and that they respect the constitution; he said "we are not here to make a coup d'etat." Andre said they would meet immediately after the ambassadors with the top brass in the police and gendarmerie to ensure that all three forces

were cohesive and effective in their shared mission. They said "we are not for or against any politician; that is not our affair;" they specifically denied being "pro-TGV." Regarding the NCC they said they have two roles: one, to ensure sufficient security for it to take place (one reason for its postponement yesterday was threats that the hotel in which it would take place would be burned, causing it to close and be barricaded); and two, to play a coinstructive role at the table themselves (there was always envisaged places for the army, police, and gendarmerie).

¶3. (C) The President: Ravalomanana was pleasantly desperate in our half-hour meeting yesterday. He suggested forming a new government, with Jacques Sylla at its head. I said that would work only if that was the consensus of the NCC, but not as a unilateral gesture; he seemed to agree. He asked for US help and I told him, in any case, that the entire dipcorps was about to issue a statement highly supportive of the NCCC (and implicitly critical of any who would boycott or delay it). He welcomed this; the statement was issued several hours later. I told him he has a serious trust problem vis-a-vis his own population: his newly conciliatory Tuesday speech was a great first step and struck the right tone, but people would be looking for follow-through to be convinced he is sincere. Ravalomanana disparaged TGV, asking me -- when I said I had just come from a meeting with TGV -- "is he still on drugs?" He bemoaned TGV's unreliability (and had a point), but I said both sides have been hard to deal with.

Later last night, Ravalomanana called one of his ministers in my presence (he knew we were meeting) to insist that the USG issue an immediate statement endorsing the notion of the NCC going forward even without the opposition if they chose not to come; he said he would come alone if need be. I explained that we ambassadors had just done a supportive statement with many of the elements he wants, and that I had also given an interview on leaving the palace that did the same; I was not in favor of another statement, even if one could be generated (which was not possible) in the short time before the scheduled start this morning. (Ambassador Radifera has called repeatedly from Washington this morning to insist further on this point.) The minister also told me Ravalomanana was "ready to make huge concessions," including accepting TGV's "Prime Minister" Monja as the new prime minister if that is what they wanted. All this took place in the context of an unpleasant situation at the airport during which the President's children were unable to leave the country and even the President's aircraft was in uncertain hands, which surely was also weighing on his mind. They departed Madagascar this morning.

¶4. (C) Sylla and the UN: Several ambassadors met at the CMR this morning with Sylla and UN mediator Drame, to compare notes. Sylla had met the Colonels yesterday and found them in a hurry and eager for the President to resign. (To us today, only the former was evident.) He observed that the momentum has shifted strongly in the opposition's favor, with 90 percent of the military now ill-disposed to Ravalomanana, and evidently demanding his departure or resignation or both. They were also unclear on what would happen if the President were to depart and/or resign. Drame was most concerned about the Colonels' attitude to the NCC, which was unclear when they met yesterday night with him in a separate meeting. Without Sylla present, ambassadors and Drame again asked aloud whether there is any will on the TGV side to negotiate, when they might get the whole enchilada without doing so (and less of it if they do)? Nonetheless, there was agreement -- later confirmed by the Colonels -- that the NCC will be necessary to put Madagascar back together again politically, whatever else may or may not happen while waiting for it to start.

¶5. (C) The Ministers: The GOM appears almost not to exist at the moment. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister received ambassadors at our request on Tuesday and Wednesday and were focused, appropriately, on restoring security and hearing our security concerns. Beyond that, however, the two retired generals were at pains to explain how the current

military structure would work, with a self-proclaimed colonel now in charge of the armed forces, all generals sidelined, reporting to a vacant defense minister position, not taking orders from the President, etc. The Prime Minister nonetheless seemed to accept the Colonels' presence and role and showed little discomfort with the obvious success of their mutiny; clearly this is not a coup from their perspective either. Other ministers, meanwhile, are in disarray. Many fear for their lives and sleep every night in different locations, openly expressing their fear of being killed. Today seems calmer than yesterday but the fear is still palpable. Resignations are likely to start today unless something changes fast.

¶6. (C) And TGV: TGV remains under French physical protection on their compound, as well as under UN "moral" protection. In any case, the President made public -- and reaffirmed to me -- his intention not to arrest TGV or his team while negotiations continue. TGV has moved somewhat about Tana, always in diplomatic vehicles, to attend meetings on neutral grounds. The French are providing a follow car with bodyguards; his movement yesterday allowed the Quai to say, truthfully, "at this moment he is not chez nous." TGV's team explained to us yesterday that more work needs to be done on NCC preparations before they will agree to attend, providing a list of four or five points that need prior resolution. Ambassadors are convinced these are mere delaying tactics as they, too, seem to have their eyes on Ravalomanana's resignation more than the NCC (or at least beforehand). Nonetheless, through the UN and FFKM Church Council and certain bilateral efforts, we continue to try to address their stated conditions for starting the NCC. Ravalomanana gave them media access and unjammed radio Viva yesterday, meeting two of them; there are still open questions about "mercenaries" on Malagasy soil, the Tana mayor situation, and releasing certain "political prisoners." Ravalomanna told me yesterday he would make further concessions at the round table, but not before.

¶7. (C) Comment: We are still on a seesaw here: one minute it looks like the NCC will begin and perhaps start to end this crisis, and the next it appears quite otherwise. Today, indications are that Ravalomanana's tenure could end within days, or even hours, despite all our collective insistence on a constitutional solution and reiteration of the consequences if there isn't one. In fact, his resignation would solve nothing in the short term as the next-in-line is a political and business crony, Senator President Yvan, followed by the current Prime Minister, who would be equally unacceptable. However, Ravalomanana currently seems desperate enough to try to save his skin by dissolving the government and precipitously naming another: I passed the message back to him again today that this also would not work as the solution must be consensual, not unilateral. (This is especially true if he were unilaterally to name Sylla, who already served as his Prime Minister for five years and who would not be seen as new or neutral; however, Sylla does still stand a chance of being named as the consensus candidate, mainly because there are so few "cotier" heavyweights among whom to choose.) Somehow, the Malagasy still must find a constitutional way through to the NCC. A strong statement from Washington along the lines proposed on Tuesday could still be helpful.

MARQUARDT